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ABSTRACT

Factors that influence the effectiveness of program evaluation in higher education and eight recommendations for program evaluation are considered. Currently, program evaluation is characterized by negotiation because of three powerful concepts: the nature of multiple constructions and multiple realities; the influence of power distributions throughout higher education institutions; and the role of politics. The theory of multiple realities proposes that participants in organizations create realities about the organization that are based on multiple and often conflicting value systems. Evaluators must take each construction into account and recognize that no single reality exists for the organization. Power is not limited to those who have the funds of authority to commission evaluations, since others can give or withhold information or sway opinion. Since organizational politics is integral to the group's functioning, evaluations cannot avoid politics. Implications and recommendations include: evaluators must understand that evaluation is not research but a teaching/learning process; evaluation is a continuous and divergent process; evaluation not only uncovers various reality constructions but creates realities; evaluation is an emergent process; and program evaluation is a collaborative process between equals. (SW)

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NEGOTIATING POLITICS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES: SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION

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I would like to begin today with several propositions which run counter to the mainstream in program evaluation. As typically conducted, the principles of good scientific inquiry usually obtain, and evaluation reports have more or less traditionally looked like research reports which went slightly askew. Elsewhere, I have contended that evaluation has moved from the era of comparison (for instance, to objectives) and description to the era of judgment, and finally to an era where the need is recognized for negotiation to be the hallmark characteristic.

Negotiation comes to be the hallmark characteristic because of three powerful concepts: the nature of multiple constructions and multiple realities; the influence of power distributions throughout institutions of higher education; and the role of politics in program evaluation. Those three concepts need to be defined, because they run counter to what most of us have been taught about social science inquiry, and because they will shape inevitably how effective program evaluation will be in the future.

The concept of multiple realities grows out of a paradigm for inquiry which runs counter to the traditional or conventional paradigm, but it is not necessary to engage in long epistemological debates to see the relevance of the concept for program evaluation. Essentially, multiple realities captures the idea that participants in organizations create for themselves "realities"--constructions of what it is they are about, what it means, and how to get there from here (what Weick calls an "organizational map"). Those realities are individual, although aspects of the realities are shared by members of the subgroup to which the individual belongs. When large numbers of subgroups share elements of belief systems and constructions about the world they inhabit, they are said to participate in organizational cultures. The

"stories" which become part of the mythology (the reality) of the organizational culture become the organization's "saga". The important thing about multiple realities is that it flies in the face of conventional assumptions regarding just how many realities are "out there". This assumption demands that the evaluator confront the cold, hard truth that there is no single reality which may be distilled from pieces which every organizational member might provide; that rather there are as many realities as there are groups or individuals who might construct them. Further, since those realities are based on multiple, pluralistic and often conflicting and competing value systems, each construction has to be taken into account in the process of evaluation.

Mitroff has commented on the effects of multiple groups with multiple constructions and their role in organizational functioning earlier this year. Using an old term which described those who have a legitimate interest in program evaluation, he calls these groups and individuals "stakeholders of the organizational mind" (1985).

The second concept is that of power and its distribution. In older forms of evaluation, our presumption was that power -- particularly evaluation power -- rested with those legitimately authorized to commission evaluation reports. This view has been termed "synoptic" for its narrow conception. Power is most assuredly not limited to those who have the money or formal authority to commission evaluations. It also rests with those who have information to give or withhold, with those who have legitimate and perhaps moral rights to the information we uncover, and with those whose careers and fortunes rest upon the judgments we make and the negotiations into which we enter. The uneven and somewhat fluid distribution of power throughout organizations

means that we cannot operate from a secure base of fiscal or programmatic legitimation. Others who have no money, but who have power and can sway opinion, who can open doors or close avenues, can and must have their values sought, displayed and honored.

Our older models of organizational functioning are simply no longer serviceable when laid alongside the realities of current forms of higher education. The implied linearity or verticality of bureaucratic of even collegial forms mask invisible connections which exist and which must be identified and taken account of in the evaluation process.

Third, we are so caught up in attempting to keep our data "clean" that we miss the simply observation that organizational politics is not "noise in the data", nor is it inescapable contamination or confounding. It is integral to and inextricably entertwined with the functioning of all human organizations. In a recent dissertation completed by a student, a Regent for the statewide institutions wistfully said, "I wish just once we could accomplish a program review without all the politics getting in the way!" (Breier, 1985). Utterly lost on the individual was the political nature of institutions of higher education, the fact that information is power, the fact that while not all information is political, most information can be put to political ends, and thefact that what is intended is not necessarily what is implemented, and that in turn is not necessarily what is experienced by participants. (There must be hundreds of examples of this phenomenon which occur between Federal legislation and program enactment at the local level.)

To the extent that we keep trying to avoid politics, or that we continue to believe that we could do better evaluations if we could do them without the politics, we are going to butt our heads against a wall again and again.

Implications for Effective Program Evaluation

These three simple concepts dictate a whole new genre of program evaluation, tailored to recognition of new institutional forms, open to appropriate and inappropriate uses of power by stakeholders, conizant of the necessity of political give-and-take, and sufficiently sophisticated to realize that recommendations which we as program evaluators see as pristine are nothing more than agendas for negotiation between stakeholding parties. The rules and roles of evaluators have changed, and the implications are potent.

1. First and foremost, those engaged in program evaluation must realize that while their activities fit comfortably within the definition of disciplined inquiry, evaluation is not research. Rather, it resembles much more a social-political process. As Cronbach warned us, "A theory of evaluation must be as much a theory of political interaction as it is a theory of how to determine facts" (1980, p. 13).

Higher education is a value-embedded proposition, and evaluation within it "inevitably serves some social agenda and becomes a tool of social advocacy" (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Since evaluation acts as a tool to produce change, any changes proposed may be viewed by one group as highly desirably, and by still another as extremely unfortunate or even highly negative. As a result, those who hold stakes in the organization -- whether from inside or externally -- have a right to voice their values and have those values honored in the proposition of any changes. To fail to "hear" or take account of the various value systems invariably robs some groups of their right to voice.

2. Evaluation is a teaching/learning process. In the past, we have tended to act as though information and data flowed one way:

toward the evaluator. But informed judgments cannot be made by all stake holders until they know and understand the value positions held by other stakeholding groups. Therefore, one role of the evaluator is to move between groups -- in a hermeneutic and dialectical process -- learning the value positions of each and in turn, teaching other groups about the various constructions of reality which are held.

The implications are profound for the data collections process: both for what is considered data, and with whom those data are to be shared. Clearly, this calls for a much larger conception of data (moving away from numbers, charts, projects), constructed to include explicit formulations of value and belief systems. The heavy reliance on numbers alone with cease to be a hallmark of program evaluation, while the negotiative and collaborative component assumes a larger share of the evaluation time spent.

The role of the evalutor changes from that of design and display expert in the experimental mode to that of linchpin, teacher and learner in a series of circles, the purposes of which include understanding and negotiation of value positions.

3. Evaluation will move from being considered a discrete, time-bound, closed-ended and convergent event to being seen as a <u>continuous, recursive hermeneutic and divergent process</u>. As a result, evaluations are never over, they are merely terminated at some time because of the lack of funds, lack of time, or the necessity to make a programmatic decision. As the effort moves between groups, understandings are enlarged, new questions arise, subtleties increase, and value positions are clarified. The process has the potential of Portnoy's onion: layer upon layer of organizational functioning may be uncovered in this recursive process.

And the questions which might be profitably addressed grows exponentially.

4. Evaluation is not merely a process which uncovers the various reality constructions which are held by stakeholders, it also is a process which literally "creates" realities. According to the first concept, reality does not exist in objective form, but rather is created by those persons who claim to know it. But such reality constructions are neither complete nor are they unchangeable. For that reason, as realities are shared between groups, individuals may alter their belief systems, may comprehend new elements which need to be added to the systems, or may simply become more informed and sophisticated about the positions of others. These changes literally create a new reality for some.

The effect -- if you don't know what you're seeing -- is that the situation is undergoing change which has the potential to contaminate your evaluation findings. But contamination is a pathological word, implying that someone is messing up the evaluation design, when such changes are, in fact, exactly what was desired from the beginning. It is not a form of threat to the evaluation enterprise so much as it is a form of what Chris Argyris calls "double-loop learning" -- learning which fosters change and improved understanding.

5. Evaluation must of necessity be an emergent process. Since the evaluator must begin with only some questions to be asnwered, or begin with the imperative of a decision's needing to be made, he or she has little idea of what is salient in the context, what values will impinge on decisions, what political influences will be brought to bear, or what the final agenda for negotiations must be, the design for the evaluation cannot be prespecified. Rather, it unfolds as various forms of data and constructions are uncovered and fed into the process. This is an

abrupt change from the previous eras where evaluation designs were as formally specified as were those for experimental research.

The disadvantage of this implication is that evaluation design is not subject to closure (until after the evaluation is completed, when all the steps may be specified retrospectively). The advantage is that open-ended designs allow the full interplay of political and power forces which characterize institutions to come to the fore--without the necessity of believing that they are contaminating the evaluation effort. In fact, open-ended designs encourage the expression of power and influence (politics) since that expression is the visible characteristic of value positions of stakeholders.

7. Program evaluation in institutions of higher education becomes less a set of judgments rendered by outside experts, and more of a collaborative, transactional and negotiated process engaged in between equals. Different value postures can lead to quite different judgments even on the basis of the same evidence, so negotiation among different value holders is mandated if the evaluation effort is to be viewed ultimately as fair and balanced (notice that I didn't say "objective"). Recommendations which are derived from the value position of the evaluator alone, or from the contractor and evaluator in consort, ignore the value positions of legitimate stakeholders, who are exploited by such a process.

The appropriate outcome for such a form of evaluation is not a set of recommendations derived by the evaluator, or his administrative client. It is rather an agenda for negotiation between interested parties which faithfully depicts and incorporates the value positions the value positions of each group of stakeholders.

Clearly, the openness of evaluation findings to negotiation invites the full play of political forces. However, it invites that full play in ways in which guarantee public disclosure and which discourage under-the-table and behind-closed-doors power alignments. The commitment to bargain over a set of agenda items demands that all parties present their items for consideration, and encourages the open and public debate over values which ought to characterize democratic or pluralistic organizations. In this situation, to fail to come forward with recommendations for negotiations is self-destructive. Thus, negotiating openly forces political interests into the arena of other competing social and political interests in ways which insure more compromise and fewer secret coalitions.

8. Finally, the agenda for negotiation takes on a very different format from the earlier technical report which characterized first- and second-generation evaluation. The agenda is often presented in the form of a case study, with both quantitative and qualitative data setting out the particularly of this context and this decision arena. Thus the negotiating agenda remains embedded in the institutions own particular history and contemporary situation. The particularly displayed this way -- in case study format -- provide a basis for discussion among and between stakeholders, as well as recreating the multiple realities which co-exist in the institution.

Conclusion

The set of eight implications above are stated simply and on the face of it, seem intuitive. They do not represent most of the practice of program evaluation in higher education, however, which has typically been conducted on the model of experimental research design and carried

out with "hired guns"--consultants from outside the institutional context whose first loyalties are to their clients (rather than to legitimate stakeholders) and to their canons for objectivity and impersonality (rather than to fairness, balance, and political realities).

New forms of program evaluation in higher education call for new roles, roles which have been filled more from the ranks of senior and prestigious faculty than from and by professional evaluators. The new program evaluator in higher education will be less a statistical expert and outside or external consultant than she or he will be a collaborator, a teacher and learner simultaneously, a reality shaper, and a mediator, negotiator and change agent. Rather than providing data arrays to institutions -- which, after all, are readily available from the institution's own institutional research division -- the evaluator will be skillful at locating and presenting the belief systems of stakeholders; will be adroit at mediating between political positions on campus and off; will not leave the scene at the delivery of the final report, but rather will move into a negotiating mode as senior arbiter in achieving compromise; and will be one of many forces channeling programmatic change on campuses. The model for these roles is less that of technician than that of anthropological fieldworker and labor relations arbitration expert.

Effective program evaluation in higher education is finally aided more by a recognition of the forces which shape the enterprise than by intense methodological and technical preparation. The three most potent forces are the pluralistic value positions, the distribution of power among and between professionals and pre-professionals, and the embeddedness of politics in everyday life. A model for evaluation which not only takes into account these forces, but whcih uses them to enlighted and

enlarge the understandings of all groups, has the greater power to undertake and ultimately sustain desired change.

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